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ABSTRACT

"By 'student choice' we mean a situation in which the behavior (of 'choosing') is not overly determined by the instructional system. That is, the student is presented with a situation in which individual variables...are major determinants of the response emitted..." This definition, found in the first of three sections of this paper, forms the foundation of a study of the student choice movement. Seven views representing a wide range of feeling include seeking student approval by the teacher, eliminating the responsibility of the teacher, production of a positive educational effect, making the student a more intelligent decision maker, elimination of an elitist tradition in education, rebellion against a pattern of hidden selector devices and improved effectiveness in instruction. Questions for research are discussed including 1) Does choice make a difference with reference to achieving goals? 2) Does choice affect the students' attitudes, affect, etc.? 3) In what segments of the educational system do students seek options? Which students seek options? What arrays do they suggest? What kinds of students make what kinds of choices? Further research is recommended. (MJM)

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THE STUDENT CHOICE MOVEMENT

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This paper has three parts. The first proposes an operational definition of choice. The second provides a short, subjective look at the present movement toward student choice, and the third poses a few research questions.

Definition: One might predict that a narrow-minded arch-determinist and behaviorist like me would at least blush and probably would run if caught discussing choice. We are told, by people who have that unshakable assurance that comes from not having read the relevant literature, that behavioral determinists "do not believe in choice." One is reminded of the story that ends: "Not believe in baptism? Hell, I've seen it done!" People talk about "choice" and, I would argue, they are often referring to a situation that can be operationally defined. An objective observer of human behavior is duty bound to consider both the verbal output (like someone saying "The student can choose the mode of instruction") and the referents or situational controls over such behavior.

Elsewhere* Dr. Rogers and I have defined choice this way:

"By 'student choice' we mean a situation in which the behavior (of 'choosing') is not overly determined by the instructional system. That is, the student is presented with a situation in which individual variables (his history, his interests, his current motivational states) are major determinants of the response emitted (i.e., the choice made)."

The word "choice," then, need not be relinquished to mentalists or to

*Geis, George L and Rogers, Joy "Student Choice." NSPI Journal. Vol X, No. 9. pps. 4-5, November 1971.

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non-determinists. We find it easy to work within this definition and to apply it to most of the literature on choice that we read.

The "Movement." I have deliberately emphasized a rigorous approach to this area in order to define the orientation of the sub-group speaking to you today.

The student choice movement is popular and populist. It is also, I think uneasily heterogeneous.

One group of proponents of student choice are apparently seeking student approval. Probably some people gravitate toward face-to-face teaching just because it offers a chance for structured affectional relationships. They seek ways to encourage and enhance those relationships. Perhaps, more importantly, teachers, especially those in certain disciplines, are being challenged by administrators and students on grounds of competence and relevance. It is difficult not to view the dramatic movement by some teachers from authoritarianism through Rogerian therapy to the "Let's have fun and play school" stance, without wondering if this isn't almost literally a function of the fight for survival. If an activity can be made pleasant enough, its relevance is irrelevant and its managers are judged for competence along very different dimensions. Turning school into play is a neat finesse and student choice is part of the ploy.

Another group of supporters are in the movement for a more subtle reason. Responsibility for learning has traditionally rested with the student. The student fails a course; the course has never been seen as failing the student. Recently the movement toward accountability in education, demands by students for improved instruction, the increasing sophistication of the new technology of education and several other factors have edged responsibility from resting squarely with the student and started it rolling in the direction of the teacher

and the administration. Under the guise of democratizing education, some teachers have invoked a ploy long used by bureaucracy: place final responsibility with the consumer by offering him choice. This is reminiscent of so many recent reactions by government. Those we citizens have hired to help govern our economy end up telling us that consumer attitude is the critical variable. Those in charge of making traffic conditions safer tell us the reasons for accidents lie in driver attitude, and so on. Notice, incidentally, that: (a) these people have been hired to do a job and that (b) they claim the critical variables needed to do the job lie outside their control and (c) oddly enough, after proclaiming their impotence, do not resign but usually request a larger appropriation!

Some teachers see student choice as a way of getting out of the dilemma current pressures have put them in. It is a palatable means of again reassigning responsibility to the student for success or failure in learning.

I find neither of these two groups admirable. I think that in the long run they will hold back progress in education and contaminate a fine idea. There are several other factions that I am glad are associated with the student choice movement. Let me turn to them now.

For some teachers the primary goal of a course is to produce positive affect -- toward the course, toward learning, toward a discipline. These teachers are not seeking personal approval and affection; they are interested in recruiting students to their disciplines, improving attitudes toward learning and so on. They believe that choice somehow enhances positive affect regardless of its effect on other dependent variables. Like most beliefs this one has been primarily an act of faith; recently, however, Dr. Rogers has produced data that provide at least a modicum of empirically derived support for this view.

Other educators are attracted to choice for a different reason, but one that also has to do with broad educational goals. They are interested in a student's becoming a more intelligent decision maker. They want him, as soon as possible, to engage in determining consequences of various alternatives, assigning values to each, standing behind the choice he has made, and so on. They are appalled at the present educational system which, while including in it goals such things as intelligent decision-making, examination of values, increased self-reliance, provides no opportunities for development of these skills. Indeed, the system at times actively fights against the student having a chance to do so. They see the very business of education -- selecting courses, deciding on study plans, arranging contingencies of reinforcement -- as the perfect simulator for students developing decision-making skills. Surely this is one of the most exciting aspects of educational revision.

Still another group of people (these groups are really overlapping with many supporters identifying with several "reasons") is reacting to a long elitist tradition in education. It is obvious that educational institutions select out on the basis of entering requirements, tests, teacher evaluations, etc. But there is a more reliable, a subtler and, I think, a more important means of selecting that has been going on because of the "single-path" nature of education. Educational theory waxes eloquently about the individual, his unique pattern of growth, of values, of interests. But for many, many years the educational system has offered a single, narrow environment for learning. I chose the word "environment" because I mean to emphasize the global -- an all-pervasiveness. I mean the rewards offered, the instructional stimuli which are supposed to guide learning, the content and hence assumed interests, the mores norms, manners, the specific dialect and vocabulary of teacher and text. Every item in this environment has acted to select and filter. At worst it is a cruel

culling system. At best it is a hidden selection system which needs to be made overt and be examined.

Some educators have joined in the rebellion against this pattern of hidden selector devices by supporting student choice. Why, indeed should there be multiple paths to Heaven and only a single path to a B.A.? Student options, these educators feel, can break the hold the single path has on education and students.

One final group involved in student choice that I will discuss is aimed at improved effectiveness in instruction. It is often willing, at least for the present, to accept many of the existing goals in education and the existing emphasis on achievement. It sees student choice as a means of adjusting educational paths to individuals and thereby making instruction more effective. The evidence that providing options does indeed lead to better learning is weak. Indeed, the group of people who will speak to you today probably represent a majority of the entire population of researchers in this area. Nevertheless, many supporters of student choice are willing to move ahead on faith before the necessary amount of evidence has emerged from research.

The proponents of the "student knows best" represent a wide range philosophically. At one end of the spectrum are those who hold a view similar to the child-centered educator, described so well by Ausubel* as follows:

"One extreme point of view associated with the child-centered approach to education is the notion that children are innately equipped in some mysterious fashion for knowing precisely what is best for them.... According to these theorists, the environment facilitates development best by providing a maximally permissive field that does not interfere with the predetermined

*Ausubel, D.P. The Psychology of Meaningful Verbal Learning. New York: Grune and Stratton, 1963, pp. 10-11.

process of spontaneous maturation. From these assumptions it is but a short step to the claim that the child himself must be in the most strategic position to know and select those components of the environment that are most congruent with his current developmental needs, and hence most conducive to optimal growth."

At the other end is the worldly cynic who holds that so little is known about what is best for anyone in education that the choice might as well be left up to the learner, indeed his intuition may be better than our small and spotty store of knowledge.

But the decisions about using student choice need not always be based on faith and intuition. Let me mention one other group of people who are trying to increase our store of knowledge. A small hardy band, they are not necessarily proponents of student choice but find it an area of research interest and a challenge to their research skills. The people who will present papers today are in that group. Like most researchers, they probably would advise caution in applying their results to other situations. And they would suggest that if the question: "Is student choice a good technique?" is not rejected outright because it is so general as to be meaningless -- then, at least any answer to any interpretation of it would be premature.

Many key problems deserve to be looked at by those who approach the field objectively. I am bothered by three which I hope we will get a chance to explore today.

(1) Does choice (of media, objectives, etc.) make a difference with reference to achieving goals? Does a student achieve better when he chooses his own path from among an array of paths than when one is assigned to him? Let me comment that I think the research on this question has been contaminated in two ways. First, into the choice research bag have been dropped studies that really are comparing methodologies. The issue of whether one instruction

technique is superior to another is different than the choice question. Of some interest, however, is comparing two groups for which the same instructional method is used, one group having been assigned to it and the other having chosen it themselves. Secondly, most comparative choice designs pit a group that has chosen its own path against a randomly assigned group. It seems to me that that isn't fair. Unlike the cynic I mentioned above, I think we do know something about learners, learning goals, and matching conditions of learning to those goals. Therefore, I think a fairer test of the efficiency of choice is to match choosers with assigned students who have been assigned NOT randomly, but after careful scrutiny of all relevant information and long deliberation over an appropriate prescription -- a "yoked design."

Another big problem I look to researchers to cast some light on is this:

(2) Does choice affect the students' attitudes, affect, and so on? What kinds of menus of choice produce affective changes? What affective responses are changed? Are the changes reflected in other learning situations? Do students differ dramatically in their reactions to choice situations? (3) In the early stages of any research, descriptive studies are specially important. I would like to know: in what segments of the educational system (objective, methods, content, etc.) do students seek options; which students seek options; what menus or arrays they suggest; what kinds of students make what kinds of choices.

These are just a few question. It is much easier to generate questions than to conduct research. So, let us now turn to some people who have done and are doing important and exciting studies.